

D&D Fiction

Shadows of Stormreach: Chapter 1

Eberron Fiction
by Keith Baker



The bustling frontier city of Stormreach, a cauldron on ambition and secret plots, has grown safe and secure as the only gateway to the riches of Xen'drik. But now danger threatens!

So begins the introduction to [Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach](#). Can you discover the secret mysteries that threaten Stormreach's very existence? For that, you'll need to learn more about this city of Eberron -- starting with the first chapter in Keith Baker's latest tale: *Shadows of Stormreach*.

Blood.

Shadow could taste blood in her mouth ... her own. A crossbow bolt was embedded in her left shoulder, another in her right thigh. Every step was torture, and her vision blurred. But she couldn't give in to the pain. The enemy was on her trail.

A group of sailors blocked the street ahead of her: Sarlonan traders unloading their scow, shouting and laughing. Shadow plunged into the mob. The sailors were human, and they towered over her. One nearly tripped over the halfling girl. Shadow didn't speak their cant, but from the tone she guessed the oath was a foul one. She emerged on the other side of the throng and kept running. If she was lucky, the sailors would prove more of an obstacle for her pursuers. A newcomer might have begged the men for assistance, but Shadow was no fool, and she knew better than to look for charity on the wharves of Stormreach.



Almost there. The sounds of ocean and city seemed distant, and even the pain had dissolved into cold void. She stumbled, barely staying on her feet. *You've come too far to fall.*

The world was fading, and she was running through a labyrinth of shadows. She heard her father: *You see the price of disobedience, girl? You shame us all.*

Then he grabbed her, powerful hands tight on her shoulders. Movement was all she had left. Held fast in that grip, all energy flowed out of her. But it wasn't her father. The hands ... the hands were too big. A dwarf? No. A human, kneeling on the street. She forced her head up to look at his face, laying her hand on the hilt of her curved blade.

Dark eyes shadowed beneath a steel helm. Eyes narrowed in concern. Dark beard, stern mouth.

“Dorn’s Teeth, Shadow! Who did this to you?” The voice was deep, gruff.

Marcus.

She’d made it.

“Rats,” she said and let the darkness take her.

Shadow’s thoughts drifted. Memories of childhood passed over her. Were they hers? They seemed so scattered, contradictory...

Staring out of the window of a luxurious manor, looking down on a city of towers...

Cutting purse-strings in a crowded market, dodging watchmen and ogre guards...

A cloaked figure pulling back his hood to reveal a reptilian face wreathed in serpents...

The fire brought her back. Agony searing through every nerve. Pain drowned out all thought. But as the fire burned through her, it restored her nerves, bringing new life in the wake of pain. Her eyes snapped open. Her shoulder, her leg... both were restored, and her surroundings were sharp and clear.

Marcus knelt over her, the last flickers of silver flame fading from his hands. “Back now?” he said.

“Why’s healing *hurt* so much?”

“Pain’s a lesson, girl,” he said. “Teaches you not to do foolish things, like run off and collect quarrels in your skin.” He showed her the crossbow bolt in his hand, the point still covered with her blood. “Care to tell me what sort of rat spits these?”

The Rats! How long had she been unconscious? She opened her mouth to explain—but someone else spoke first.

“I believe the young lady was speaking of us.” The voice was oily, obsequious, born to lie. The speaker was a halfling, like Shadow herself; a tiny, delicate figure, his features hidden beneath a deep hood. The halfling wasn’t holding any weapon, but his companions made up for this. Two lanky human women stood to either side of him, heavy crossbows loaded and leveled. The two might have been twins, though it was difficult to tell beneath the dirt and grime. The final member of the quartet was a dwarf; this stout figure had an odd, crouched posture, as if he’d been stretched out on a rack. Like the halfling, he hid his face beneath a heavy hood. The dwarf held a long knife in each hand, and the hilts of another dozen blades protruded from his clothing. All four were dressed in black leather armor, and the nicks and tears in the leather suggested that they’d seen their share of battle.

“Bilge Rats,” Shadow whispered. “Wharf gang. I thought... we had a family connection.”

“Oh, we did,” said the halfling. It seemed his ears were as keen as the dwarf’s daggers. “But I’m afraid someone made us a better offer. Still... no reason you need to die this night, priest. Shadow is coming with us, but you can still walk away.”

“You’ve a fine sense of justice for a worm,” said Marcus. He rose to his feet, Shadow standing next to him. “I think it only fair that I make you the same offer.”

The two women glanced at one another, but the halfling laughed. “The numbers are in our favor, friend. Last chance.”

Marcus shook his head. “I suppose it is,” he said. He glanced down at Shadow. “You know what needs to be said?”

Shadow nodded. “Of course. *Spike!*”

The pale halfling frowned, confused. He opened his mouth to issue a command—

Too late.

A whirlwind of steel swept out of the alley behind the thieves – a blur of blades and metal. The first archer fell before she even had a chance to cry out, nearly decapitated by Spike’s long axe. The warforged soldier was a fearsome sight: he towered over the bandits, a monster formed of metal and wood, gore dripping from his axe. Emeralds were set into his armored shell, and these pulsed with a baleful light, hinting at furious energy that burned within him. Spike pulled his blade from the stranger’s neck, and the dwarf flung up his hand as his comrade’s blood sprayed across his hood. Spike drew back for another blow—

“Enough!” Shadow called. “Withdraw!”

Spike’s axe was already descending, but he checked the blow just before it struck the dwarf’s head. The light burning in Spike’s heartstones dimmed, his version of a sigh. He took a step back but kept his axe poised to strike.

“Do you really need all three?” Spike said. His voice was strangely high-pitched for his size and always made Shadow think of a pipe organ. “What about the matching female?”

The woman in question had dropped to the ground to examine her wounded twin. On hearing the warforged’s words her gaze shot up, fear mingling with fury in her eyes.

Shadow allowed a little satisfaction to creep through her usual concern. They’d cut things close, but all in all, a good night’s work. She drew her curved sword, and gestured toward the little man. “It seems the numbers have turned, my friend. And unless your companions drop your weapons now... Spike’s axe is still thirsty.”

“That’s another way of saying that I’ll kill you,” Spike added.

Marcus said nothing. Shadow knew that the priest disliked fighting people, even thugs like these; he was at his best battling restless spirits or supernatural beasts and never liked the sight of blood on the streets. It was an annoying trait in their line of work, but tonight wasn’t the first time Marcus had saved her life, and so far he’d followed her lead.

“You have no idea how much trouble you’re in,” the halfling said. For a man with no weapons, he seemed awfully calm. Shadow felt a shiver of doubt: Could he be a spell weaver? No matter – Spike was poised behind the little man, ready to strike at the first sign of incantation or mystic gesture.

“True.” Shadow said. “But I know exactly how much trouble you’re in. I know who you’re supposed to be working

for. And from what I've seen tonight, you're playing a new game. So here's what's going to happen. Your friends are going to put down their weapons. You're going to tell me your name. And then you're going to tell me exactly what you Bilge Rats are up to. Or you can stay silent, and my friend Spike can start removing limbs."

"Do that," Spike said.

The stranger shook his head. "You shouldn't have hurt Drella. But the girl is all we need. This is the last chance for the rest of you to walk away."

Shadow sighed. These people were supposed to be gutter thugs. She hadn't expected this sort of resistance from them. And even if they had tried to kill her, she didn't really want to let Spike loose on strangers. It was time to get this off the street. "Spike—"

Shadow didn't see the signal, but clearly one was given. The thieves moved forward, cloaks falling back. What was revealed surprised even Shadow.

They were rats.

Beneath his hood, the halfling had suddenly grown a long, angular snout covered with sleek white fur. Red eyes caught the torchlight, and teeth flashed as he snarled at Shadow. The archer was still human, but the man Shadow had thought was a dwarf was another ratman, his fur black and patchy; a long, wormlike tail lashed out from beneath his cloak. There was magic at work here, and Shadow hated magic. And the leader had seemed so confident in the face of danger...

They needed to pull back. There were too many unknown factors.

Unfortunately, her companions had other ideas.

"*Sovereign bitch!*" Marcus swore. Priest he might be, but he was quite free with the names of other people's gods. Marcus was in motion the instant the rats revealed themselves. Shield raised and spiked morningstar in hand, Marcus charged the former halfling. His weapon fell, and there was a glimmer of blood, but the shield blocked Shadow's view. Still, if the gore on Marcus's weapon was any indication of his enemy's fate, the thieves should have surrendered when they had the chance.

What's gotten into him? Marcus was the least bloodthirsty member of their little troupe. It wasn't like him to attack a stranger.

Shadow stepped to the side, trying to get a clear line of sight on the enemy. What she saw next chilled her.

Spike joined the fray. The warforged swung his greataxe, his heartstones pulsing with pure joy. He landed a solid blow on the ratman. Spike's axe sliced through armor, cleaving through flesh and bone with a crunch. It was a blow that should have cut into heart and lung. But when Spike drew his axe back for another blow, there was no fountain of blood. The dwarf lashed out with his own weapon, and sparks flew as his blade dug into Spike's armor plating.

Marcus was fighting the woman. Though human, this thief was still a deadly foe. The priest's heavy plate armor slowed him. The woman darted and weaved around him, thrusting with her own short sword and searching for gaps in his armor. She'd found a few already. Blood streaked Marcus's armor, while he couldn't land a solid blow with his morningstar.

And the other... where was the albino?

The answer came all too quickly, a white streak in the corner of her eye. Shadow turned, but she wasn't fast enough. The little ratman slammed into her, knocking her to the ground, and even as she struggled against him, his teeth were moving for her throat.

Perhaps it wasn't such a good night's work after all...